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AUTHOR	Albury, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

The demand for innovative educational development is also a demand for new approaches to leadership in higher education. The assumption that the adoption of an institutional policy that encourages the use of learning technologies is all that is necessary for the successful implementation of the policy obscures the role of middle level leadership. During the late 1990s the University of Wollongong began preparing to offer several degrees at regional centers by flexible delivery methods. The paper explores the B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) development project in a heuristic way, using two models from the literature on leadership for change in both corporate and university settings to explain first what had to be done in order to be successful, and then what the author, as the leader, did to enable that success. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/MES)

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ON BEING 'HEAD' – REFLECTIONS ON LEADING AN EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION INVOLVING COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

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Rebecca Albury
Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong, Australia
ralbury@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The demand for innovative educational development is also a demand for new approaches to leadership in higher education. The assumption that the adoption of an institutional policy that encourages the use of learning technologies is all that is necessary for the successful implementation of the policy, obscures the role of middle level leadership. During the late 1990s the University of Wollongong began preparing to offer several degrees at regional centres by flexible delivery methods. I explore the B.A. development project in a heuristic way, using two models from the literature on leadership for change in both corporate and university settings to explain first what we had to do to be successful and then, what I as the leader did to enable that success.

Keywords

leadership, flexible delivery, educational innovation

Introduction

This is a story about both an individual and about a group of academics and academic support staff at the University of Wollongong who developed a B.A. degree to be delivered to three off-campus locations by 'flexible delivery'. I was the Head of the South Coast Project (Arts) and together with a number of younger academics and members of three academic and student support units have successfully developed and delivered two years of the program and will be offering the planned third year and a few additional electives in 2002. As a result of the August 2001 announcement of extra university places in regional Australia the degree will also be offered in the inland centre of Moss Vale in 2002.

I reflect on the role of Head and the experience of leading a project that demanded the integration of learning technologies into humanities and social science teaching, encouraged the integration of students at four sites in the teaching of individual subjects, required the teamwork among people working in an individualistic faculty culture (Albury, Lefoe, Littler, & Trivett, 2001) and challenged conventional notions about teaching and learning (Curtis, Lefoe, Merten, Milne, & Albury, 1999). I will explore the project in a heuristic way, using two models from the literature on leadership for change in both corporate and university settings to explain first what we had to do to be successful and then, what I as the leader did to enable that success. Some of the explanation is specific to the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong between 1998 and 2000, but the general approach may be applicable to other innovative projects.

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Meeting the Demand for Innovation

Today almost all academic innovation is driven as much by external demand as by personal or group initiative. The project was funded by the Federal government to improve access to higher education in rural areas through the use of the latest developments in technology. A submission by the University of Wollongong to the Commonwealth/State Working Party on Higher Education suggested that higher education in the region would be best provided through provision of a campus in Nowra (Shoalhaven) with smaller satellite centres further south. Teaching and learning would be supported through technology including: videoconference and computer-facilitated learning environments, as well as local tutor support (University of Wollongong, 1996). Three new centres at Nowra, Batemans Bay and Bega form part of the South Coast Education Network (SCEN), a partnership initiative between the University of Wollongong, Illawarra Institute of Technology (TAFE), the Department of School Education and local government bodies.

Although the region is referred to as the South Coast, the localities of the three education access centres are quite different. Early consultation with local government and local businesses identified several common themes for the subjects to be included in an Arts degree. Social and environmental policy, cultural heritage including Aboriginal studies, literature and history, and communications studies, became the framework for the degree that is now called B.A. (Community and Environment). In addition, the consultation identified the need for transferable skills including research, presentation and policy analysis to be central to the degree offerings. There was no articulated demand for preparation for entry to teaching via a Dip. Ed. then, so we are playing catch-up to introduce enough subjects to meet current student demand.

The South Coast Project (Arts)

Members of the Faculty of Arts had to learn new ways of working in order to develop and deliver an interdisciplinary specialisation of the B.A. Until 1998, when the subjects were chosen and the work began to produce flexible delivery versions, no one in the Arts Faculty had constructed an undergraduate degree specialisation that was not firmly based in single humanities or social science disciplines. While this is explicable in terms of the ways that academic disciplines maintain their boundaries (Becher, 1989), it made it difficult for most of the designated subject developers to envision a different way of working. For the most part, the lecturers with the responsibility for developing the subjects for flexible delivery had little knowledge of the teaching goals of other disciplines, yet they would have to build on the skills taught by others. In addition, only a few had used any of the proposed flexible delivery methods.

The financial constraints were equally challenging, the degree was to be constructed mainly of existing subjects, with two exceptions that were similar to subjects offered at Wollongong. The intention was that the application of novel teaching methods would be available for students enrolled in subjects on the Wollongong Campus as well as for the small number of students in the new centres through the conversion of existing subjects. The relatively small amounts of money available to support curriculum innovation were for staff development on the Wollongong Campus and results would be visible in Wollongong as well as in the access centres. That was the vision, but it was introduced during a period of restructuring and thus considerable upheaval in the Faculty of Arts. The changes on the Wollongong campus were resisted; as was any suggestion that new learning technologies had anything positive to offer. Peter Taylor's (1999a) observations about the place of 'loss and grief in resistance' provide a rich framework for exploring the intense period that provided the context for my appointment as Head of the South Coast Project in the Faculty of Arts in April 1998. It was not a good time to be launching a new project.

In this unpromising climate I looked for several indicators of success: completion of teaching material on time was central, but also a sense of shared ownership of the project, enthusiasm for learning new skills and the adoption of some of the new teaching modes by academics outside the project group. There was success, achieved through partnerships both among members of the Faculty

and with members of academic support units. The friendship and support within a self-identified 'core group' of subject developers and coordinators is a result of self-conscious team and partnership building in the Faculty. The process in the Faculty involved the academics coordinating the subjects in the B.A. (Community and Environment), including academics from the Aboriginal Education Centre, an educational development lecturer based in the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), several academics from Learning Development, and a change management consultant also based in CEDIR. In addition, links were made with the Library, Information Technology Services and the Academic Registrar's Division so that the Arts academics could gain an understanding of the larger institutional context of their work. While there are certainly dangers to applying corporate management literature to university governance, I have used Senge's (1990) model of organisational learning as a framework for the success story.

Peter M. Senge argues convincingly that organizations as well as individuals need to practice learning to meet the challenges of the contemporary economic change and resultant social changes. In *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) he argues that systems thinking is the necessary skill for meeting those challenges. The standard responses of a section of an organization can frequently lead to suspicion between workers who are immersed in producing their contribution to a desired outcome because of communication breakdowns. Problems that arise as a result of misunderstanding of vocabulary or processes may delay work in another section or be seen as a deliberate undermining of that section's work. Greater knowledge of how the system as a whole works and of one's own place in it reduces the chances of misunderstanding and thoughtless undermining during times of change. As a social scientist, I was already familiar with the explanatory power of systems theory in complex situations and as participant in academic and social movement politics, I was reasonably adept at using systems thinking to support interventions. However, most of the subject developers were relatively junior academics and not yet experienced in the university systems, nor in thinking about wider consequences of specific actions. Senge's (1990) model for a learning organization can be summarised in five points:

- Systems thinking
- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- A shared vision
- Team learning

The change management consultant introduced me to Senge's work as a part of her role in assisting team building among several groups involved in flexible delivery. It was clear that inward looking standard processes would result in both duplication of effort if groups worked in relative isolation from each other and in gaps and breakdowns in the delivery of technology, learning materials, training and support at the access centres.

Even in an encouraging context like the University of Wollongong, teamwork and partnerships do not simply arise, but have to be encouraged and facilitated (Scott, 1999). It was important that the Head of the South Coast Project (Arts) be a person with a strong vision of both the degree itself and the process for achieving success. I was already modelling the objectives of the project in my teaching practice: an emphasis on tertiary literacies (the current University terminology for generic skills), a willingness to try innovative methods of teaching and learning, a commitment to a student-centred curriculum, experience in interdisciplinary teaching and research, and strong team work capabilities. The individual Arts academics could not have produced the curriculum results on their own because most members lacked the 'mental models' for interdisciplinary teaching or research.

The culture of the Faculty was one of loyalty to discipline groups and suspicion of cross-Faculty activity (Becher, 1989). The strength of the culture can be illustrated by several members who refused to take part in the project because of the interdisciplinary nature of some subjects and the multi-disciplinary structure of the degree (see Taylor, 1999a): "When people's ideological identities are at stake, passions run deep" (Becher, 1989, p. 98). In addition there were comments by the 'refusals' who did not take part in the project. Some senior members of the Faculty worked

against it and suggested that the participants were 'disloyal' to their disciplines as represented by the teaching program to which they belonged. The junior academics felt conflicted about how best to further their career opportunities at Wollongong since most were still on contract or probation; the program heads seemed more like gatekeepers to career success than did a senior lecturer leading an innovation. The South Coast offered opportunities to learn and practice new educational technologies in a supportive atmosphere, but the academics received little encouragement from their most immediate colleagues. The strong support of the Dean of Arts for team building and the project workshops was important to my ability to continue with the strategy of always building on the work that had gone before to enable the completion of the development tasks.

The project workshops aimed to develop a community of learners by promoting a shared trust, motivation, and vision of what the degree would be like (Senge, 1990). I worked in partnership with the change management consultant and the educational development lecturer and a tertiary literacies officer to make every group activity both move the project forward and build a team among the academics (Curtis et al., 1999). Project members learned to listen to those in other disciplines and expanded their mental models of teaching and learning. While it was certainly a case of uneven development, as their personal mastery increased, members took on different roles within the group. One academic in the team has shared her online teaching experience, developed with the help of the CEDIR based education development lecturer, with another Arts academic to create a flexible modular subject jointly taught and credited by two disciplines. It was an innovative subject made available in Wollongong two years ahead of delivery to the education access centres; a model for bringing together the approaches and analytic methods of two disciplines within a single subject. The success of the team building processes was demonstrated in the 2000 conversion and promotion round in which a group of junior academics pointed to their roles in the project in their applications and celebrated their achievements at a group lunch.

In addition, I facilitated the development of systems thinking among Arts academics by representing the group at many levels. I reported back to the project members, Faculty executive and Faculty Education Committee about these activities. I was a member of the campus wide South Coast Curriculum Committee that identified potential problems and guided the implementation of the various Faculty and support services plans. It was an opportunity to work closely with people from many areas of the University (Albury et al., 2001) and provided a level of support for the role of leader that was not available in the Faculty except from the Dean during the development stage of the project. I helped recruit and train casual tutors and was on the interview panel for the coordinators of the access centres. As the delivery of the subjects began, I travelled to the education access centres to enrol students and to support and consult with tutors. It's obvious that I, too, increased my personal mastery, challenged my mental models of academic work, developed a broader shared vision and learned in teams as I refined my abilities at systems thinking in the University.

As I said, it is an adventure story. If I stopped here I would be joining a long tradition of conference speakers who say what they did, but not how they did it. While it is of course, good leadership practice to speak in terms of what we have done, such talk obscures the task of the head who must create the sense of shared vision and responsibility in a disparate group of people. I want to now share with you an explanation of what I did as leader of a collection of largely inexperienced academics that allowed them to become an innovative and learning team in spite of the lack of support for their activities by some of the senior members of the faculty. I was able to draw on one of the advantages of working in a relatively small and less hierarchical institution; I could ask for help from anyone ranging from the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) to level A academics in Learning Development. One source was the assistance of a change management consultant who had been employed under a CUTSD grant to facilitate the working relationships necessary for the successful implementation of flexible delivery. In a sense she played a role that I have often played in the past: the Head's 'best friend' (I think of this as a professional position). She served as a sounding board, encourager, workshop presenter and documenter; she made me challenge and expand my mental models of change and academic work, and she introduced me to management literature that was applicable to universities as well as the corporate sector.

Leading the South Coast Project (Arts)

When I became a leader with the title 'Head', I set out to read some of the leadership literature. Many of the ideas were familiar, that is, I already knew the underlying theory and the basic critiques, though the specific applications were unfamiliar. While much of the leadership literature highlights the role of a leader in envisioning, supporting and inspiring change (cf. Ramsden, 1998), it is important to remember that in higher education, some change is not inspired by anything other than necessity, nor worth whole hearted support (cf. Taylor, 1999b). Regardless of the critiques I needed some useful slogans or rules of thumb to direct my daily activity as a leader. The change management consultant provided some at first, but I recognised a list of five that describe my style in Paul Ramsden's *Learning to Lead in Higher Education* (1998, p. 111). Ramsden adapted the list from Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (1987). They point to five practices with two commitments to action for each:

- Challenge the Process - Search for Opportunities; Experiment and take risks
- Inspire a Shared Vision - Envision the future; Enlist others
- Enable others to Act - Foster collaboration; Strengthen others
- Model the Way - Set the example; Plan small wins
- Encourage the Heart - Recognize contributions; Celebrate accomplishments

As with many stories that can be told within a clear framework in hindsight, this account comes after I had been practicing leadership; after all I didn't read Ramsden until late 1999 as the development phase was completed and implementation was beginning. Nevertheless, I will now explain what I did as leader within Kouzes' and Posner's five point model. Certainly the early stages of the South Coast Project were about challenging the process. Even before I became the Head, while I was a member of a single subject development team, I was searching for opportunities within the institution. When the three of us first learned that our related subjects were selected for flexible delivery, we began to experiment with Majordomo discussion lists in our other classes and to talk with others who were already doing so. The students at the Wollongong campus have entered into the spirit of our experiments; they have thoughtfully offered advice on what worked and what didn't and reflected on their educational experiences at the same time.

The Arts Faculty had a strong individualistic culture that focused inward toward the disciplines and encouraged competition rather than collaboration. We began our formal work with a workshop on surviving and thriving in times of change. This created an opportunity for many Project members to get to know each other in a setting that was removed from the Faculty and its politics. At the same time the facilitator encouraged us to talk about the restructuring and the changes and to reframe ourselves as change agents through our participation in the South Coast Project. The scene was then set to shape and implement change rather than be helpless in the face of the inevitable. The early project workshops were focused on the key tertiary literacies that would be built into the degree. A fluctuating group of Arts academics attended and built solidly on the work of the past workshop (Curtis, et al., 1999). The workshop process built a complex table of academic skills to be developed in the subjects based on the shared understandings of the disciplinary traditions of the humanities and social sciences: critical thinking, problem solving, written and oral communication, research skills and application, computer and information literacy and social interaction. These skills were sequenced through the degree with learning and assessment tasks that promoted increasing mastery. The operating slogan at that time was, 'only move forward' and it worked in a Faculty where the proposal for a 'let's talk about it again' committee was a standard response to any change.

The subject developers had little experience of curriculum design, and little knowledge of the approaches to learning that were particular to other disciplines than their own. A couple of experienced academics in the group were enthusiastic and open about learning from the others, making it possible for the less experienced people to ask questions and expose areas of ignorance in a safe setting. The excitement of seeing their growing understanding of the intrinsic integration of learning skills and subject content encouraged all participants. Later workshops were devoted to skills development, visiting Nowra and meeting representatives of other units of the University

involved in the South Coast work. Meeting other stakeholders enlarged the vision from that of a B.A. to a University project. As the subject developers contributed to shaping the vision of the degree and then the implementation of that vision they were fully enlisted in not only the immediate project but also the larger project of rethinking teaching and learning within the Faculty.

Once the Arts academics began to think differently about teaching and learning, they began to act on their ideas. I described how two developers have turned a previously discipline-based subject into an interdisciplinary one. The enthusiasm of the two has encouraged some of their previously reluctant colleagues to try using WebCT as a communication or content delivery tool in their subjects. As recently as early 2000, website development was perceived as the domain of CEDIR programmers or especially skilled research assistants, now it is on the way to being a part of some administrative support job descriptions. By fostering collaboration, sharing knowledge of how the University worked and building skills in the workshops I enabled the two women to act with rather than against the strategic direction of the Faculty and they in turn have enlisted others in the collaboration.

I formally led the workshops and modelled the processes the group were learning. I practiced the technology skills that we all were learning, transferring them to another project. Most importantly for any leader of an educational innovation, I looked for and found support for myself in the role of Head both within the Faculty (the Dean) and outside (the change management consultant, an education development lecturer and a senior University administrator). These four provided a much needed reality check in an atmosphere of continuing neglect, to the point of denial, of the project within the Faculty and hence recurrent waves of concern among the subject developers. My supporters offered a safe place for me to express my doubts and despair and receive reassurance and reminders about how far we had moved. While this is not overtly one of the five points in the model, I would argue that a small support group is an important part of enabling the leader to act. Universities are not noted as places where support is automatically offered to struggling middle managers, often the struggles and the small successes are not noticed, though failures are discussed. If I was going to lead change in an atmosphere that frequently lapsed into negativity and resistance, then I needed to have my standard responses challenged in a safe space, to be strengthened, and to celebrate my accomplishments.

It is clear that planning small wins is much the same as only moving forward. We used workshops to divide the project into smaller pieces and then 'do' them. Since most subjects were going to be developed by a single academic, I wanted to create a place of safety for sharing questions and achievements. It had to be safe for the most technologically incompetent person to ask for and receive help from a much younger person without comment. Hence, the process began by an attempt to create coherence for the interdisciplinary degree through articulating the intellectual skills at its centre: critical analysis, research, oral and written communication, careful reasoning and a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of important ideas and social issues. Through those discussions and the increasingly detailed documents that grew from them, people learned to listen to and appreciate the perspectives of others and to better understand the larger tradition of making shared meanings that constitute the humanities and social sciences. Once that process was complete (it took many months), subject developers could see where their particular subjects fit in the whole and were ready to share and learn new skills to make it happen.

Once the development began to happen in a concrete way, it was important to support and encourage academics who were working alone with very little time release from their other teaching duties. In an education sector that today is noted for low morale, I tried to make the project work a place of reward, not an additional burden. At many project meetings I made a point of going around the table so each developer could discuss current successes and problems. Usually they found one's success was the solution to another's problem. This was an opportunity to acknowledge the very different contributions that people made to the project. I have written promotion and job references and made available an endless supply of chocolate, biscuits and hot drinks. I have tried to celebrate the accomplishments of the project members with public announcements to the group as a whole. I did not begin being 'Head' with this five-point model in

mind, it describes many aspects of my practice. Ramsden (1998, p. 110-119), too, draws the work of Kouzes and Posner and Senge together in his discussion an approach to leadership in the current context of Australian higher education.

Conclusion

I have discussed my leadership of the development of the B.A. (Community and Environment) in this paper. The first years of implementation are a 'further instalment' since I have taken on the role of coordinator of the degree program and the public face of the Arts degree on the South Coast. Few projects involving educational technology are complete once the initial development phase is over. The longer term implementation and smooth continuation of the project depends on similar leadership skills. This development story is one of personal and organizational learning. It is also an example of success as a result of leadership that enlisted colleagues to take risks and extend their skills and sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the project. If members of the project group can learn some of the systems thinking skills along with the project specific tasks, the changing context of implementation with its challenges to the original vision will be less onerous, for there are still many changes to be made. The pride that the members of the project share in our accomplishment is not so much 'we did it' as 'we are doing it'.

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